Analysis

Intervention in Iraq, 1958-1959

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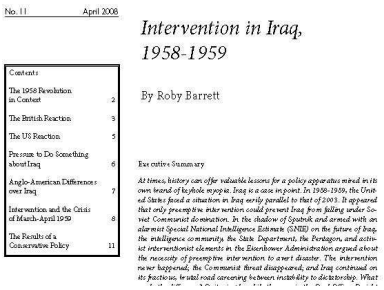
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Intervention in Iraq, 1958-1959

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Executive Summary

At times, history can offer valuable lessons for a policy apparatus mired in its own brand of keyhole myopia. Iraq is a case in point. In 1958-1959, the United States faced a situation in Iraq eerily parallel to that of 2003. It appeared that only preemptive intervention could prevent Iraq from falling under Soviet Communist domination. In the shadow of Sputnik and armed with an alarmist Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) on the future of Iraq, the intelligence community, the State Department, the Pentagon, and activist interventionist elements in the Eisenhower Administration argued about the necessity of preemptive intervention to avert disaster. The intervention never happened, the Communist threat disappeared, and Iraq continued on its fractious, brutal road careening between instability to dictatorship. What

Iraq

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In the post-9/11 world of 2003, most policy-makers were unaware that history offered a relatively recent cautionary tale about precipitous action in Iraq. As in 2003, this tale originated in a period of global instability, an acute national insecurity over a global threat, and a debate over strategy for dealing with and influencing the developing world. In the late 1950s, the United States first faced an immediate, imminent threat to its very existence in the form of the Soviet Union. Understood in the context of the times, this threat equaled, if not exceeded, the insecurity of 9/11 and fears of Islamic extremism. Americans had to come to grips with the "duck and cover" mentality that geography and the strongest navy and air force in the world could not protect them from nuclear weaponry. American cities were now defenseless against a nuclear ballistic missile attack. The Soviet Union openly promised to "bury" not only US power and influence, but also, based on the rhetoric of its leaders, the nation itself. It appeared that Moscow and its blustering leader, Premier Nikita Khrushchev, had gained the upper hand in the missile race, and, with powerful allies, was supplanting US influence in the developing world.

Soviet gains in the Middle East were particularly threatening. Moscow had leveraged the 1955 Czech Arms deal with President Gamal Abdul Nasser's Egypt into rapidly expanding influence across the region at a time when Middle East petroleum resources were increasingly critical to the West. With the success of Sputnik, the destruction of the Hungarian revolution, the Suez Crisis and the massive influx of Soviet arms and advisors into the region as a backdrop, President Dwight

Eisenhower's commitment to defend the Middle East from Soviet aggression, the so-called "Eisenhower Doctrine," rang hollow. Suez and its aftermath created a strong sense that the region would succumb to Soviet-backed radical secular nationalism and that Egypt's Nasser was "the wave of the future." In the US, right-wing hand-wringing surged, and the Democratic Party's criticism of US foreign policy spiked. Political pressure escalated to do something about the Middle East. It was in this environment that the pro-Western government in Iraq collapsed. The namesake of the Baghdad Pact alliance literally disappeared overnight, and Iraq fell under the sway of a group of radical, nationalist, leftist army officers whose best organized support came from the powerful Iraqi Communist Party (CPI).

Iraq transformed itself from a British colonial creation, client, and almost exclusive foreign policy issue to a fundamental American problem. It also further damaged US confidence in Britain's ability to manage its sphere of influence, a confidence already severely shaken by the Suez Crisis two years earlier. From a US perspective, the role of the CPI in Iraq was the primary issue. Although the events in Iraq actually constituted a highly complex interaction of political, economic, and social forces, decision-makers in Washington had very little understanding of it. (This complexity is described by Hanna Batatu in Old Social Classes and Revolutionary Movements of Iraq.) Given the simplistic perceptions of the Eisenhower Administration, the make-or-break policy issue would be its ability to adjust its perception, and thus its policies, as the situation developed — the ability to learn on the fly.

The Iraqi coup of July 14, 1958 set off a debate within the US government over the efficacy of military and covert intervention in the Arab Middle East. The coup led directly to Anglo-American intervention in Lebanon and Jordan and brought calls from elements within the British and US governments for intervention to remove the nationalist government of Brigadier Abd-al-Karim al-Qasim. In both Washington and London, many felt that the fiasco of Suez had been an aberration brought about by poor communication and planning. These activist elements were convinced that the situation in Iraq demanded concerted action.

The 1958 Revolution in Context

From its creation in 1920, Iraq had formed a problematic centerpiece for British and later American foreign policy in the Middle East. Distilled to its basics, the issue of Anglo-American relations with Iraq has centered on influence and control or, as has often been the case, the lack of either. Iraq stands at a crucial pivot point between the non-Arab Muslim world and the Arab world. Geopolitical tectonic plates meet in the Mesopotamian valley and the competition for control of the region further fueled by oil has steadily intensified over the course of the twentieth century. In the mid-1950s, nationalist and pan-Arab fervor drained what little support had existed for Hashemite Iraq. By the mid-1950s, Nasser was far more popular in Baghdad than the Iraqi government and single-mindedly hostile to the pro-British regime.

Since the Suez Crisis of 1956, the preeminent question for US policy in the Middle East had been how to deal with Nasser and, in a broader sense, what secular Arab nationalism actually represented. In the early 1950s Washington's attempts to co-opt Nasser had failed. After Suez, Nasser emerged as the most influential political figure in the Arab world. Attempts to marginalize or isolate the Egyptian leader failed. In early 1958, he engineered the creation of the United Arab Republic (UAR), a union of Egypt and Syria with himself as the leader of the new state. Driven by its inability to isolate Nasser, the Eisenhower Administration embarked on a new policy of limited, cautious cooperation with the UAR. Secretly low-key attempts to foment Arab opposition to the Egyptian leader continued. To counter the UAR, Washington pushed for a union between Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Bitter about US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles' perceived "betrayal" at Suez, the British repeatedly warned the Iraqis and Prime Minister Nuri Sa'id to avoid entangling itself in any US-sponsored schemes. London believed that the Iraqis were no match for the Egyptians, either in propaganda or subversion, and the British had no interest in seeing its political or petroleum investment go up in a conflagration ignited by Dulles.

In addition, because of Iraqi attitudes about Kuwait, the British were nervous about Iraqi efforts to enlist Kuwait into their Arab Union with Hashemite Jordan. London feared that any close alignment between

Iraq and Kuwait would be used as a pretext for undermining the latter's sovereignty. Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Sa'id, a former Ottoman official and army officer, viewed Kuwait as part of Iraq (as would his successors). Thus, the British had well-founded reasons for opposing any cooperation in US schemes that might leave Baghdad out on a limb in a confrontation with Nasser or that might stoke Iraqi ambitions or enhance their influence in the Gulf vis-à-vis Kuwait.

Ironically, it would be the British, not the Americans, who made a key contribution to the undoing of the Hashemite regime in Baghdad. During the first half of 1958, facing mounting UAR pressure on Lebanon and more specifically on Hashemite Jordan, London acquiesced to Nuri Sa'id's desire to confront Nasser. London indicated to Sa'id that an Iraqi military demonstration near the Syrian border might serve to inhibit Nasser's lieutenant, Colonel Abd-al-Hamid al-Sarraj, the Director of Syrian intelligence, and his attempts to subvert the governments of Jordan and Lebanon. With this nod from London, Nuri Pasha ordered several Iraqi military units to the Syrian border. This move included a brigade stationed east of Baghdad under the command of Brigadier Qasim. Ignoring normal security precautions, the unit was issued ammunition and routed through rather than around the capital. Qasim and his deputy, Colonel Abd-al-Salam al-Aref, had long been plotting against the government and made the most of the opportunity. They simply made an unscheduled stop in Baghdad and overthrew the government. This mistake served as a lesson for later governments. Not even Saddam Husayn, with his pervasive, ruthless internal security apparatus, would allow army units to enter Baghdad.

While Nasser and the Syrians may have inadvertently caused the coup, initially, the US and Britain assumed that the UAR had orchestrated it. This was a logical conclusion; the UAR was actively attempting to subvert Iraq, Lebanon, and Jordan. This perception drove US intervention in Lebanon and British support to Jordan. In point of fact, Cairo was as much in the dark as Washington and London. Within a matter of days, the British realized that Nasser, who was now in Moscow lobbying for Soviet support to combat "Western aggression," was probably not pulling the strings behind the Iraqi enterprise. London determined that Iraqi nationalists, many of whom were as

hostile to Nasser and his vision for the UAR as the old Hashemite regime, dominated the Qasim government. Despite the fact that the new government included Nasserists and Ba'thists, the Communists and Qasim himself were opposed to any real union or for that matter cooperation with Nasser.

The British Reaction

In Baghdad, the rebel army units rounded up and executed all of the members of the royal family that they could find. Rioting and looting also broke out. In part, it was no doubt orchestrated by the coup plotters themselves, but much of it was spontaneous. British and Western installations and expatriates became targets of the Iraqi mobs. These mobs also attacked and burned the British Embassy, killing the British defense attaché in the process. The chaos now endangered the new revolutionary regime because it threatened to spark British intervention. Qasim understood the precariousness of his position. Not wanting to repeat the experience of Rashid Ali al-Gaylani's rebel government of 1941, which the British crushed, Qasim issued shoot-on-sight orders against rioters and looters and ruthlessly restored order. He quickly apologized for the destruction of the British embassy, and shrewdly promised to honor Anglo-Iraqi oil agreements. The new Iraqi leadership also guaranteed the safety of foreigners.

The restoration of order and the promise to honor oil agreements had the desired effect in London. The British preferred to work something out with Qasim and avoid the risks and expense of invasion. The burned embassy, dead defense attaché, and the slaughter of the Hashemite family and Britain's loyal supporter Prime Minister Nuri Sa'id put London in an awkward position. Intervention was risky, particularly with the old leadership dead, so they opted for the more expedient and certainly more practical course. They shed a few tears for past supporters, awarded a posthumous medal to the dead attaché, and set about making friends with the new government. In a strategy memo, the Foreign Office summed up the cold pragmatism of the Macmillan government, "It looks as if the new regime is in firm control. The sooner we can get on to proper terms with it the better. Its

present intentions seem respectable, particularly as regards the oil and direct Anglo-Iraqi relations. Of course we cannot immediately condone the murders and the burning of the Embassy, but soon after the Baghdad Pact meeting we ought to extend recognition of the regime."[1]

British Iraq had been effectively eliminated, but the new government under Brigadier Qasim appeared to be a surprisingly acceptable alternative. Not only did the British have assurances from Qasim about the Iraqi Petroleum Company (IPC), but it also had concluded that Qasim would pursue a policy line independent of Nasser. Despite later comments by Macmillan that Britain had no ability to intervene, a Nasserist takeover in Baghdad might have brought a very different reaction from London. For the British, the strong support from the Iraqi Communist Party for Qasim was problematic but preferable to Iraq's alignment with Nasser. London checked the economic bottom line, swallowed its pride, and moved to support Qasim.

Macmillan and his advisors began to devise strategies that would enhance Qasim's ability to act independently of his Communist, Nasserist, and Ba'thist supporters. Early on the British pressed for US concurrence in a resumption of weapons shipments to the Qasim government. The British Ambassador in Baghdad, Sir Humphrey Trevelyan, best summed up the benefits of supporting Qasim: "Conversely a refusal [to ship weapons] would be profoundly depressing and demoralizing to Qasim's anti-communist supporters who want to retain links with the West. It might indeed have the effect of just pushing Qasim himself over the communist brink. Her Majesty's government therefore believes that the action they are taking is in the best interests of the Middle East as a whole."[2] The alternative, namely a reconquest, was not impossible but rather impractical. In addition, London was well aware of the fractious nature of Iraq and, given the elimination of key members of the old regime, had no stomach for nation building from scratch.

Despite recriminations from Colonial Office officials about the credibility of the British government demanding the immediate removal of the Qasim regime, London took a remarkably pragmatic position. In August, the Foreign Office summarized London's new

strategy for the region: “We hold on to the Gulf. We establish the best relations we can with the new regime in Iraq. We try to ‘neutralize’ the Lebanon and Jordan in such a way as to permit the withdrawal of United States and United Kingdom forces as soon as possible. We improve our relations with Israel. Our relations with Egypt are not affected, i.e. we work for a return to cool normality. We try to reconstitute the Baghdad Pact as a Northern Tier without Iraqi participation.” The Foreign Office went on to say, “It is essential in the interests of the maintenance of our economy and standard of living to maintain our control of British oil interests in the Gulf, more particularly Kuwait. A separate paper is being prepared on this. Hold the Gulf States. It is militarily feasible. It is expected of us by the American[s], who will probably take parallel action themselves as regards Dhahran if need arises. It is perhaps even desirable to hold Kuwait in the interests of our relations with the new regime in Iraq; if the Arab nations control completely all the sources of Arab oil they can hold us to ransom, but so long as the Iraqis know that we can do without Iraqi oil if necessary, by relying on Kuwait, they have a strong inducement to come to terms with us.”[3] The British understood that geopolitically and economically, Kuwait was their best leverage on Iraq — the cork in the Iraqi bottle.

British policy included a blunt assessment of what London had to be willing to do to protect its interests. It highlighted not only the British willingness to intervene if necessary (the key phrase), but also London’s confidence that it could do so successfully if required. “The main difficulty is an internal one in the Gulf itself. So long as the Rulers there can maintain their position we can manage all right. But if, say, the Ruler of Kuwait returns from Damascus and announces his intention of braking off his association with us and joining the U.A.R., we are faced with the dilemma either deposing him and more or less occupying and running Kuwait as a colony, or acquiescing in the loss of the remaining most important source of Middle Eastern oil. We should presumably choose the former alternative, but to do so would run us into serious difficulties with the rest of the Arab world and make our task of returning to normal relations with Iraq more difficult. Nevertheless these difficulties would have to be faced. Pending the creation of a dangerous situation of this kind we should avoid forcing the issue. In particular we should not put troops into Kuwait or Qatar

against the wishes of the Ruling Families there. But we must devise some means of having forces available for instant action."[4] Intervention was an acceptable alternative but only as a last option. If British interests could be served by policies short of intervention, then that was the more desirable path.

The US Reaction

Macmillan's pragmatic adjustment surprised Washington. Initially, the Eisenhower Administration believed that the British would move quickly to topple the new Iraqi regime. US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, who was attending a Baghdad Pact conference in Ankara, indicated in early telephone conversations that he fully expected the British to intervene. Initial discussions with British Foreign Secretary Selwyn Lloyd contributed to this expectation. In a telephone conversation with Eisenhower, Dulles agreed that the Iraqi coup was obviously another Nasserist enterprise and that both Lebanon and Jordan were undoubtedly next. To prevent this, the US began deploying troops in Lebanon and pushing for a parallel British move to support King Husayn in Amman. The Nation accurately pointed out in an editorial, "The news from Baghdad sent us barging into Lebanon before we had received a second report from the observers – before, indeed, we even know exactly what was happening in Iraq."

In this atmosphere, Washington began to view London's position on Iraq and Qasim with growing dismay and alarm. Vice President Richard Nixon summed up the concern questioning whether the British "considered Nasser a greater danger than the Communists to the Near East." The inability of the British to foresee and forestall the coup was a shock; now, the British decision to seek an accommodation further eroded Washington's faith in London's ability to protect its own or, by proxy, Western interests in Iraq. This laid the seeds for a divergence in Anglo-American policy toward the new Iraq.

Pressure to Do Something about Iraq

Iraq also became a domestic political problem for the Eisenhower Administration. The recession of 1958 coupled with Cold War issues like Sputnik, Hungary, and increased Soviet influence both globally and in the Middle East put the administration on the defensive. For opponents, Iraq became the latest example of failed policies and a lightning rod for criticism from both the political right and left. Congress launched closed door hearings into the "intelligence failure." Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Director Allen Dulles, the younger brother of the Secretary of State, tried to lay the blame on the British, and when he could not offer any insight into the make-up or personalities in the new Qasim government, Senator J. William Fulbright pointed out that in spite of a huge amount of money spent on the intelligence community, the US was, where Iraq was concerned, "fumbling in the dark."5

Conservative commentators in the media expressed fear that the Qasim regime would become a Soviet satellite. The coup, the criticism, and the Communist threat pushed Iraq to the top of the intelligence community's agenda. It placed enormous pressure on Allen Dulles. In addition, Foster Dulles' close relationship with Eisenhower had provided an unprecedented level of political protection to the CIA director. In the winter of 1959, the Secretary of State had a relapse of now terminal colon cancer. Personal loss aside, the CIA director no longer had the political "top-cover" that he had historically enjoyed. Not wanting to be accused of another failure, during Fall 1958 and Winter 1959, the drumbeat of CIA reporting on Iraq took a steadily more ominous tone. If the Communists took over, no one would be able to say that the CIA had not predicted it. The CIA Office of Current Intelligence increasingly emphasized Qasim's growing "dependence" on the Communists for support as the so-called "Arab Cold War" between the Iraqi regime and Nasserist and Ba'thist elements escalated. On February 17, 1959, a Special National Intelligence Estimate (SNIE) concluded that Qasim lacked the "ability to stem the movement toward a Communist takeover," noting that the only obstacle to such an outcome appeared to be the control of the security

forces by non-Communists. Even US Ambassador John D. Jernegan, who had been criticized for merely more optimistic British assessments, reported a "grave danger" that in "the short run" Iraq would "come under predominantly Communist control."6

The Eisenhower Administration did not believe that Qasim was a communist; rather they feared that his growing reliance on the CPI would pave the way for a Communist takeover. Qasim's anti-Western rhetoric and increasingly close relations with Moscow did nothing to dispel this fear. This was exactly the same logic used five years before to justify Operation AJAX, the overthrow of Prime Minister Muhammad Musaddiq in Iran. There was only one significant difference. In 1953 in Iran, the government of Winston Churchill had pushed the US toward intervention; now in Iraq, the British counseled patience and a go slow approach. London believed that Qasim offered the best guarantee against a Communist takeover and feared that US bellicosity would cost them their petroleum investment.

As the Qasim regime became increasingly anti-Nasserist, Eisenhower and the US foreign policy establishment saw an opportunity. In the fall of 1958, Washington began to realize that they had misunderstood the nature of the Iraqi coup. Nasser was not the hidden hand behind the July coup. Nasserists and Ba'thists found themselves under attack by Qasim and his CPI supporters. Aref, Qasim's partner in revolution and a strong supporter of union with the UAR, found himself first exiled as ambassador to Bonn, then arrested and sentenced to death by an Iraqi court. As aggravating as Nasser was, the Egyptian leader had established his anti-Communist credentials with a merciless assault on Communists in both Syria and Egypt. Unhappy with Soviet support for Qasim's Iraq, Nasser now engaged in a heated war of words with both Qasim and Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, referring to the Russians as the "Mongol hordes." Washington and Cairo for their own respective reasons finally had a topic on which they agreed, namely the danger posed by the Qasim regime and their Communist supporters.

By the end of 1958, Nasser had concluded that the most immediate threat to his leadership of the pan-Arab movement and to his vision for the UAR lay in Baghdad. He now had competition from another Arab revolutionary. In discussions with US Assistant Secretary of State for

Near East and South Asian Affairs, William M. Rountree, Nasser offered "a scarcely-veiled invitation to collaborate on Iraq." Over a period of a few months, the administration shifted from alarm over Nasserist plots in Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq to encouraging Nasser's propaganda war and subversion of the Qasim regime. Eisenhower likened it to an unappealing choice between "John Dillinger and Al Capone," but quickly concluded that an anti-communist Nasser was preferable to Qasim and the CPI. Iraq appeared on the verge of becoming the first Communist-dominated state in the Middle East. Activist elements in the Republican Party, encouraged, if not led, by Vice President Richard Nixon, began to increasingly talk about the necessity of doing something about the threat posed by Iraq.

Anglo-American Differences over Iraq

This situation created a strain in Anglo-American relations. Intent on protecting their oil investment, the British preferred to gamble on Qasim. In expressing his concern about Communist influence and London's support for Qasim, Vice President Nixon complained, "the British thought they could make a deal with the Iraqi Communists." There was more than a little truth to Nixon's observation. The British actually feared a Nasserist regime in Iraq and the potential consequences for the petroleum interests there and throughout the Gulf more than the potential threat of a Communist takeover. London pressed for continued arms shipments to Iraq, arguing that strengthening Qasim and the Iraqi military provided the most potent firewall against the Communists and Nasserists.

In Baghdad, British Ambassador Trevelyan stated, "One of our main problems is how to improve relations between the Americans and Qasim." The Macmillan government pressed Washington to use its "influence" in Cairo to reign in Nasser's attempts to destabilize the Qasim regime. For its part, the Eisenhower Administration ignored or soft-pedaled British requests, stating that any attempt to influence Nasser was futile; simultaneously, Washington encouraged Nasser's anti-Communist, anti-Qasim efforts. As the State Department

explained, “While we have not directly linked with Nasser’s present campaign against communism (and) the steps we have recently taken to aid Egypt, there is no doubt that Nasser knows that we have taken these steps as a sign of approval of his current campaign and that they have emboldened him in his anti-Communist efforts.”[7] This tacit understanding with Nasser had other benefits. Washington was now attempting to come to a compromise with the UAR over Lebanon and facilitating the withdrawal of American troops from Beirut. It was a desirable outcome for Nasser to focus his political machinations on Iraq rather than Lebanon or Jordan. Then, there was the added potential benefit that Nasserist elements might actually succeed in mounting a coup that would unseat Qasim and lead to the destruction of the CPI.

Intervention and the Crisis of March-April 1959

On March 5, 1959, CIA Director Dulles told the NSC that “events seem to be moving in the direction of ultimate Communist control.” Then, on March 6, a planned Communist rally in Mosul brought the situation in Iraq to a head. With the support of Nasser’s henchman in Syria, Colonel Abd-al-Hamid al-Sarraj, pro-Nasser elements in Mosul under Colonel Abd-al-Wahhab al-Shawwaf launched a premature coup. It failed, and Qasim allowed the Communists and their supporters to run amok, hanging real and perceived enemies of his regime from lampposts. The Communists began to pressure Qasim for more cabinet positions including key roles in the military and security services. It also appeared that Qasim would create a Communist-backed “people’s militia” as a counterweight to the army. As nationalists and pan-Arabists were systematically eliminated from the government, CPI and Soviet hopes surged.

In the propaganda war, Baghdad Radio began referring to Nasser as the “foster son of American imperialism.” At the time, Nasser was widely viewed in the Middle East as Washington’s “chosen instrument.” To some degree, Nasser found that perception useful. Nasser countered by declaring that Qasim had delivered Iraq into the

“hands of the Communists.” Nasser outdid even the most vociferous anti-Communists, stating “If a Communist State is established, the Communists will smite down all patriotic and nationalist elements – or eliminate them, as we say – by inventing incidents until they get rid of all these elements and will then establish a Red terrorist dictatorship in which subservience prevails.”8 For once, Washington and its so-called “chosen instrument” on the Nile were in absolute agreement.

The Mosul coup had a profound effect on official Washington. The Eisenhower Administration had pegged its hopes in Iraq on a successful pro-Nasserist coup. It had now failed. Intelligence reporting of steady Communist gains and predictions of domination increased. In early April, the resignation of Secretary of State Dulles, now in the last stages of cancer, created an additional distraction in the foreign policy establishment. In this environment, Vice President Nixon, the presumed Republican nominee for president in 1960, took on an expanded role. Nixon wanted to do something about Iraq. He believed that the foreign policy apparatus and particularly the State Department were being too cautious and the result was Communist gains around the world and particularly in the Middle East. He also wanted a substantive foreign policy role in the administration to bolster his coming presidential bid. When Dulles stepped down as Secretary of State in early April 1959, Nixon lobbied for and got the role as lead in the NSC meetings when Eisenhower was absent. He wanted to use this opportunity to put his imprint on US policy toward Iraq.

Nixon’s desire for a more aggressive approach to the Iraqi situation came to the forefront during the April 17 meeting of the NSC. In the absence of the President, who was playing golf in Augusta, Nixon chaired the meeting. In recent weeks, he had become more aggressive vis-à-vis Iraq. Nixon clearly wanted the US to take a more activist role. He was not happy with what he viewed as State Department passivity or with the decision to “coordinate closely” with the British. In the meeting, he carefully pressed for a more aggressive approach. Nixon questioned Assistant Secretary of State for NEA Rountree on his recommendations. Rountree had stated that “the US could not tolerate a Communist take-over in Iraq,” but took the position that the US could do nothing proactive to prevent it. The Vice President pointedly

commented that if the State Department analysis were taken at face value "there was really nothing that the U.S. could do to prevent the worst from happening." The view was that the US had to be "invited" into Iraq if it were to intervene directly. In that regard, Nixon pointedly observed that if we waited for a Communist takeover, there would be "no one left to invite us or anyone else to intervene."

Rountree responded, "The revulsion against any government set up under [US] aegis would be so great that it would probably be swept away and its replacement would in all likelihood be a Communist government. Thus for this reason alone we cannot advocate this course, apart from the long standing United States principles which would be violated by what would in effect be unprovoked United States aggression and apart from the catastrophic psychological reaction throughout Africa and Asia which would inevitably portray us as being worse aggressors than the Communists." Trying to appease the Vice President, Rountree offered the alternative of encouraging the UAR, stating "military action would consist of infiltration of U.A.R. military forces into Iraq to work hand in hand with dissident forces." After additional discussion, the meeting adjourned with a decision to revisit the "options" after a joint working group had had time to examine options and "courses of action."9

By the next NSC meeting, any thoughts of intervention were discussed in terms of a last ditch effort in the event of civil war or collapse in Iraq. The reporting on Iraq did not change. Predictions continued to be dire, but within the space of a week, the parameters for US action had become much more conservative. When asked what happened following the Nixon-led NSC meeting of April 17, General Andrew Goodpaster, the president's chief of staff, stated that he had informed Eisenhower by telephone of the thrust of Nixon's apparent position and that Eisenhower had absolutely rejected overt or covert intervention in the current circumstances. The President chaired the next meeting, and the gloomy prospects for Iraq were discussed, but he reconfirmed the "wait and see" approach. Eisenhower's innate conservatism and experience triumphed over any possibility of precipitous, ideologically driven activism.

This conservative approach also received significant support from across the Atlantic. Eisenhower pushed for, and London welcomed, a joint working group on Iraq. London saw it as a means of monitoring and influencing US policy. The British believed that US intervention in the current situation was "doubtful," but they were still concerned. In June 1959, a Cabinet paper entitled "The Status Quo," outlined London's position; "We should avoid appearing to push them into a decision one way or the other." If US intervention appeared imminent, London would then decide whether or not to try to dissuade them. The paper concluded, "It has always been our appreciation that our interests are best likely to be served by Qasim's maintaining himself in a position dependent neither on the Communists nor on the pro-Nasserites and able to pursue a central and neutralist line of policy. … So long as Qasim remains in power and continues to give evidence of his intention to maintain the independence of Iraq we should not countenance, still less encourage, any designs against him from any quarter." If possible, the British intended to avoid intervention.

As events transpired, Eisenhower and Macmillan were rewarded. On June 30, a SNIE on Iraq concluded, "We now feel that our recent SNIE's have been too gloomy. … We now think Communist control of Iraq is less likely." What had happened? The Communists overplayed their hand. They used the failed Mosul coup to push for greater influence in the Iraqi government. In the immediate aftermath of the coup, Qasim appointed more Communists to the government and set up a special court for trying Nasserist and Ba'thist "traitors" to the revolution; however in subsequent months, he resisted key Communist demands. Having used the Communists to neutralize his Nasserist and Ba'thist opponents, Qasim turned his attention to the threat posed by the CPI. Between their high-water mark of April 1959 and the summer of 1960, the Communists found their power steadily curtailed. No militia was created. The court, despite its rhetoric, passed sentences that were considerably less draconian than the CPI had demanded. To everyone's amazement, some defendants were actually found not guilty. In the summer of 1959, when CPI-sponsored demonstrations and mob violence against nationalists broke out, Qasim dismissed several Communists in the government and arrested various leaders in a show of strength. The CPI had now become the problem.

His real political coup came in the form of a deft political maneuver for which he has gotten little credit. Qasim promised to restore political life by allowing "legitimate" parties to resume political activities. Of course the CPI saw this as an opportunity to emerge as the best organized and perhaps largest "real" party in the country. The CPI was the mainstream Communist group, but another splinter Communist party existed. Qasim shrewdly named the rival splinter party as the only legitimate Communist party in Iraq. By the fall of 1959, the "Communist" crisis, as opposed to the perpetual Iraqi crisis, had largely passed. In October 1959, Ba'thists, including a young Saddam Husayn, almost assassinated Qasim. Instability was endemic, but the British policy of supporting Qasim against the CPI had paid off, as had Eisenhower's rejection of a high-risk, open-ended intervention. Instead the US and Britain allowed the centrifugal forces of Arab and Iraqi politics and the historical antipathy between Cairo and Baghdad to run its course.

The Results of a Conservative Policy

By its second anniversary, the Iraqi revolution had ground to a halt. Qasim complained to the British that the Americans were organizing a Muslim league to overthrow him. Increasingly unpopular and justifiably paranoid following the assassination attempt, Qasim searched for a unifying issue. He wanted to distract Iraqi attention from the moribund economy and political stagnation. It was at this point that Qasim came up with what would ultimately prove to be a fatal idea. He began to make random threats about an anti-imperialist campaign targeting Oman, Palestine, and Arab oil. He then resurrected the Iraqi claim to Kuwait. On May 1, 1961, British Ambassador Trevelyan reported, "we would not read anything immediately sinister" into Qasim's comments about "blood ties" and "no frontier" between Iraq and Kuwait, but as "a typically unconsidered outburst." In May and June, the war of words escalated, and Qasim managed to paint himself into a political and diplomatic corner.

Although the exact decision-making process remains a mystery, Qasim concluded that he had to at least go through the motions of backing up

his rhetoric. In late June, he began to move tanks and troops to the Kuwaiti border. Whether this was an attempt to intimidate Kuwait into concessions or a serious move to occupy its oil-rich neighbor, the outcome proved disastrous for Qasim. The US Ambassador in Cairo, John Badeau, asked Nasser for his assessment of Qasim's motives and speculated that the Iraqis were compensating for the lack of financial success resulting from the IPC nationalization. Nasser said, "Yes, you are right, that is what people say, but I don't think that is ultimately what the reason was. I think that one morning Qasim was in the men's room and he met his Chief of Staff and one man said to the other, 'Why don't we take Kuwait?' Then the other man said, 'Wallahi, billahi, tallahi' [By God that's a good idea, let's do it]. That's the way we sometimes reach decisions." The British reaction was swift and decisive. Following a request from the Kuwaiti ruling family, the British deployed marine and air units from Bahrain to Kuwait. Ambassador Trevelyan stated that he attached "overriding importance" to the ability to deal effectively with an Iraqi attack, but warned that "the fallout from a military confrontation with Iraq would once again excite anti-British sentiment throughout the Middle East."

The Iraqis backed down and ultimately Arab League forces replaced the British in Kuwait. Nasser's friend and mouthpiece Muhammad Heikal wrote in an article in Al-Ahram, the widely circulated Cairo daily, "The original Suez symbolized the victorious struggle for Arab rights but Qasim had, by threatening a small Arab country which had just become independent, produced the incredible situation wherein Saudi and Kuwaiti troops were standing shoulder to shoulder with British Imperialists who had returned with no bloodshed and no shots fired facing an Arab army." London and the Kuwaitis received an additional benefit. Nasser had refused to recognize Kuwait because of its relationship with Britain. Now, with Egyptian troops guarding Kuwait against an Iraqi invasion, recognition was forthcoming.

As for Qasim, this failure fatally weakened his already deteriorating position. Iraqi nationalists, Nasserists, and Ba'thists plotters finally caught up with him in February 1963. He was summarily executed along with his closest supporters. The nationalists and Ba'thists utterly destroyed the Iraqi Communist Party in a bloodbath that exceeded that of Mosul in 1959. As Batatu stated, "The Communists fought as only

men could fight who knew that no mercy was to be looked for in defeat."[10] King Husayn of Jordan stated that he knew "for a certainty" that the coup had the support of US intelligence. With reference to this last statement, the entire US government supported the coup, but that is different from having a direct hand in it. While the US did not actively participate in the coup, Washington certainly encouraged those opposed to Qasim, particularly through the auspices of his nemesis on the Nile, Nasser. This support and encouragement caused one Ba'thist to comment later that the Ba'th came to power "on the backs of the Americans." As with all overstatements, this one contains at least a grain of truth. In the end, Eisenhower and even Nixon got exactly what they had wanted without overt intervention.

One can only speculate about what might have ensued in 1959 if a president, inexperienced in foreign and military affairs and unduly influenced by an ideologically driven vice president, had intervened in Iraq — but then again we may have a pretty good idea. Luckily, Eisenhower knew more than a little about the military, launching invasions, occupying countries, choosing and listening to good advisors, and balancing the interests of the United States. The President also represented the best in the American conservative tradition of a pragmatic, risk-adverse foreign policy and fiscal responsibility. History may not repeat itself but a truly informed, conservative appraisal of historical precedence in this case would have been instructive. As for the British, Macmillan knew what London had created in Iraq and opted to avoid intervention. In 1926, Winston Churchill, the Chancellor of the Exchequer and arguably the creator of Iraq, faced with the bill for the British occupation, grumbled, "I hate Iraq, I wish we had never gone to the place." He compared staying in Iraq to "living on an ungrateful volcano." In 1958 and 1959, an American President at a political low-point decided that intervention in Iraq had to truly be a last resort. For 45 years, Eisenhower's judgment stood as policy. Even with the provocation of Kuwait 1990, the US avoided overt intervention in Iraq. It was frustrating — particularly given the American urge to do something and to fix things, but what was Eisenhower's real alternative? We now have an idea.

1. “Policy in the Middle East, CAE Shuckburgh to FO for distribution,” August 24, 1958, Public Records Office (PRO), FO371/132545, p. 7.
2. “Telegram from British Embassy Baghdad (Trevelyan) to FO,” April 28, 1959, No. 429 (Eq1071/21), PRO, FO 371/140957, p. 1.
3. “Policy in the Middle East, CAE Shuckburgh to FO for distribution,” August 24, 1958, Public Records Office (PRO), FO371/132545, p. 2.
4. “Policy in the Middle East, CAE Shuckburgh to FO for distribution,” August 24, 1958, Public Records Office (PRO), FO371/132545, p. 5.
5. Allen Dulles Briefing on the Middle East Situation,” July 22, 1958, *Executive Sessions of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee*, Volume X, p. 572.
6. “Telegram from US Embassy Baghdad (Jernegan) to WDC, March 26, 1959, No. 2758, Part 1,” DDE Library, PPDDE, Office of the Staff Secretary, Box 8, Section II, pp. 1-2.
7. “Memorandum John A. Calhoun, Executive Secretariat, DOS, Office of the Staff Secretary to General Andrew Goodpaster, White House,” April 15, 1959, DDEL, PPDDE, Office of Staff Secretary, Box 8, pp. 4-5.
8. Robert Stephens, *Nasser, A Political Biography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1971), p. 309.
9. “Discussion at the 402nd Meeting of the NSC,” April 17, 1959, DDEL, DDEPP, Ann Whitman Files, NSC Series, Box 11, pp. 1, 8-11. Also see FRUS, Iraq 1958.
10. Batatu, *Old Social Classes*, pp. 982-987.

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